



## Developing writing concepts for teaching purposes: Preservice L2 writing teachers' developing conceptual understanding of parallelism



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### ABSTRACT

While there has recently been increased attention to L2 writing teacher education in the professional literature, much work remains to be done. In particular, while recent studies have examined the outcomes of L2 writing teacher preparation and professional development courses on teachers' overall attitudes and conceptions of the teaching of L2 writing, little research has focused on how teachers engage with the specific content and assignments in the moment to moment progression of such courses. This study addresses this need by examining two pre-service ESL writing teachers' developing understanding of the concept of parallelism within a team microteaching assignment in a TESL methodology course. Using a teacher knowledge framework and Vygotskian sociocultural theory analytical, this study traces changes in teachers' understanding of this single concept as they move through the various stages of the assignment, as well as examining how the teachers' interactions with instructional materials and the teacher educator mediated their developing understanding. The findings demonstrate that even in preparing to teach a relatively simple concept such as parallelism, novice teachers engage in an extended process of learning and that how the two teachers interacted with the available mediation differed based on their underlying conceptions of writing. This analysis can illuminate how L2 writing teachers learn in teacher education coursework and provide insight for L2 writing teacher educators and supervisors as they work to promote L2 writing teachers' ongoing professional development.

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### Introduction

As a discipline, L2 writing has tended to focus more of its intellectual energy on the needs of those learning to write in an L2 than on the needs of those learning to teach L2 writing (Hirvela & Belcher, 2007). While there has recently been increased attention to L2 writing teacher education, much work remains to be done. Recent studies have examined the outcomes of L2 writing teacher preparation and professional development courses on teachers' overall attitudes and conceptions of the teaching of L2 writing, yet little research has focused on how teachers engage with the specific content and assignments of such courses.

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This study addresses this need by examining two preservice L2 writing teachers' developing understanding of the concept of parallelism, or the rhetorical device by which conceptually similar ideas are expressed using similar grammatical structures to highlight the connection between them. How the teachers' knowledge of this concept developed within a team microteaching assignment in a TESL methodology course is examined. Using research on teacher knowledge and Vygotskian sociocultural theory as analytical lenses, this study traces changes in the teachers' understanding of this concept as they move through the various stages of the assignment and examines how the teachers' interactions with instructional websites and the teacher educator (TE) mediated their developing understanding. By examining how these teachers learned this writing concept for teaching purposes within the context of this assignment, this study provides insight for L2 writing teacher educators and supervisors as they work to promote L2 writing teachers' ongoing professional development.

### *L2 writing teacher cognition*

Historically, L2 writing research has focused much scholarly attention on learners (Hirvela & Belcher, 2007). The majority of publications that do focus on L2 writing teachers have primarily been concerned with theorizing the knowledge base needed for L2 writing instruction by offering models and resources for L2 writing teacher preparation courses (Coxhead & Byrd, 2007; Ferris, 2007; Hyland, 2007; Weigle, 2007). A variety of resources designed to provide current and future L2 writing teachers with an introduction to the discipline and necessary pedagogical practices also exist (e.g., Canagarajah, 2002; Casanave, 2004; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014).

Such resources are clearly valuable for both novice L2 writing teachers and L2 writing teacher educators, yet there is still a need for empirical research examining what L2 writing teachers know and believe about teaching L2 writing and crucially how they acquire such knowledge. The body of research that addresses these critical questions is small but growing. Much of the existing research has focused on understanding teachers' beliefs and perspectives on various aspects of the teaching of L2 writing such as written feedback (Guénette & Lyster, 2013; Junqueira & Kim, 2013; Lee, 2003; Montgomery & Baker, 2007). Researchers have also investigated the various ways ESL and EFL writing teachers conceptualize the curriculum of their courses (Cumming, 2003; Shi & Cumming, 1995) and how L2 writing teachers' pedagogical decisions are impacted by the cultural and institutional contexts in which they teach (Tsui & Ng, 2010; You, 2004).

Research examining teacher development in the context of preservice or in-service teacher development has largely focused on changes in teachers' attitudes and beliefs regarding L2 writing instruction (Lee, 2010; Shin, 2003; Winer, 1992), the development of new writing teacher identities (Lee, 2013), and knowledge of genre-based writing pedagogies (Gebhard, Chen, Graham, & Gunawan, 2013). All of these studies report positive changes in teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge of L2 writing as a result of their participation in professional development.

Overall, studies examining L2 writing teacher cognition have focused primarily on examining how teachers' overarching conceptions of writing and the teaching of writing can change as a result of teacher education coursework. Such research clearly demonstrates that teachers can and do learn through teacher development efforts, but more work that examines the specific processes by which L2 writing teachers learn within such activities is needed, including work investigating how teachers develop knowledge of writing concepts for teaching purposes.

### *Teacher knowledge*

While the nature of teachers' content knowledge has not received much attention in the L2 writing literature, there is a rich body of scholarship on teacher knowledge of content in general education research (see Galluzzo, 1999 for a review). One particularly influential concept in the teacher knowledge scholarship is *pedagogical content knowledge* (PCK) (Shulman, 1987). PCK recognizes that teachers' knowledge of the content they teach is qualitatively different from that of non-teaching content experts. While teachers possess expert *content knowledge* of the major facts, theories, and methods of a discipline, much as non-teaching content experts would, they additionally possess the knowledge of how to represent particular content in pedagogically appropriate ways to particular students in particular educational contexts. This dynamic integration of knowledge of content, students, pedagogy, and educational contexts is PCK.

Since its introduction, several modifications and clarifications to the concept of PCK have been proposed, for instance, differentiating between different kinds of content knowledge (Ball, Thames, & Phelps, 2008) and emphasizing the role of teachers' awareness of students' emotional responses to particular content (Rosiek, 2003). Of particular importance for the current study are the developments that have emphasized how teachers' underlying value-laden conceptions of the content impact how they select, adapt, and supplement curricular materials (Gudmundsdottir, 1990).

While the framework of teacher knowledge proposed by Shulman (1987) and subsequently developed by other researchers allows us to describe teachers' content knowledge, it does not adequately account for how such knowledge develops. In fact, this focus on reified knowledge, rather than knowledge developing in activity, is a primary critique that has been leveled at research in the teacher knowledge framework (Ellis, 2007; Hashweh, 2005; Park & Oliver, 2008). To address this problem, I turn to Vygotskian sociocultural theory (SCT) which provides an explicit model for studying knowledge development in activity.

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